

play ball!

Boost your performance
and stay injury free with this
yoga practice guide for
volleyball, softball, and soccer players.

When Melody Parker, a former professional volleyball player and the coach of the Santa Barbara City College men's volleyball team, first introduced her athletes to yoga, they were skeptical. But Parker, who has been practicing for 15 years, persevered. "I knew if I could get a bunch of wiggly 18-year-old guys to sit still with their eyes shut and concentrate on their own minds, their performance on the court would benefit," she says. Her team was quickly convinced by both the asana and meditation portions of the yoga sessions. "Some players who had chronic injuries felt better, others felt stronger overall, and they were sold," Parker says, adding that the athletes often ask her if they can practice yoga after volleyball practice. "It gives them a calmness they might not get otherwise."

The mental benefits that yoga offers—learning to stay present, managing stressful situations with the breath, not being tied to the outcome—are invaluable to professional players, since a win or a loss can be decided in a few highly charged seconds. Those same benefits help the rest of us, too, because it's a lot more fun playing ball sports like volleyball, soccer, and softball when we're fully focused on the game. "The mind tends to scatter in high-pressure

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by Dimity McDowell

photography by David Roth



softball

At six feet eight inches and 250 pounds, Jason Hirsh looks more like a defensive lineman than a baseball pitcher. His size used to limit his agility on the mound. "It takes a lot of energy to move my limbs," says Hirsh, a pitcher for the Colorado Rockies. But these days, he moves his limbs as gracefully as some of his smaller teammates, thanks in part to yoga.

Five years ago, Hirsh enrolled in a six-week yoga program for elite pitchers led by Alan Jaeger in Los Angeles. Since then, he has attended every year to prepare for spring training.

The athletes meditate, participate in challenging mat sessions, and then integrate those practices into postyoga pitching sessions. "My hips are open, my shoulders are loose, and my sciatic nerve, which used to be a problem, isn't anymore," the 27-year-old from Burbank, California, says.

Although his schedule during the regular season doesn't allow him a full hour of daily yoga practice, he practices certain postures, like Warrior Pose II, on his own. "It's second nature for me now," he says. "When I feel off-kilter, I just return to yoga."

Baseball and softball require a great deal of twisting—keeping the lower body stable while the upper body winds around. Elements of the pitching motion are echoed in the movements of a fielder or a batter at the plate. "You twist when you bat and when you throw. Even trying to steal a base involves contorting your body," says Rayburn. "What gives you the power is when the twist generates from a strong, stable base." Rayburn recommends three poses for softball players that emphasize stabilizing the lower body as you twist and stretch.



Lunge Twist

The most important principle for twisting and moving the body efficiently when you play softball or baseball is to maintain your overall stability, especially in the lower body, while your upper body is in motion. Begin in a lunge with your right foot pointing forward and your knee over the heel. Keep the left leg straight, balancing on the ball of the left foot. Push the feet powerfully into the ground and steady the legs with strong

muscular engagement. Moving with your breath, strongly extend both arms overhead and then down into prayer position in front of the heart. On an exhalation, twist toward the right knee and place your left elbow on the outside of it. Hold for 5 breaths and then release the pose on an inhalation. Repeat, twisting to the other side. Emphasize stability in the feet, legs, and hips as you move into and out of the twist.



Prasarita Padottanasana

(Wide-Legged Standing Forward Bend), variation

This pose builds foot and lower leg strength, which is the foundation of a strong structure. Stand with the feet wide apart and pointing forward. Inhale deeply, then exhale and fold forward, placing both hands on the ground. Spread your toes and, without actually moving the feet, isometrically draw them toward the center. As you do this, press the outer edges of the feet down. Keeping your shins strong, place the right hand on your right hip and twist to the right, doing your best to keep the sacrum level. Hold for a few breaths, maintaining power in the feet and shins, and then twist a little deeper. Come to the center, placing the right hand back on the ground. Reestablish strength in the shins, and repeat on the other side.



Adho Mukha Svanasana

(Downward-Facing Dog Pose), variation

Ideal for softball players, this pose also incorporates the strong, steady legs required to play soccer and the shoulder alignment important for playing volleyball. To begin, come onto your hands and knees. Then straighten your knees and lift your hips, coming into Downward-Facing Dog. Position your hands shoulder-distance apart, so that the creases of your wrists are straight across and your feet sitting-bone-distance apart (or slightly narrower than your outer hips).

Keep the legs strong, the top of the arm bones back, and the shoulder blades firmly pressed into the upper back. Moving with your breath and maintaining your alignment, on an exhalation

reach your left hand back to the right outer shin and twist. (If you can't reach your shin comfortably, try shortening your stance slightly.) Hold the pose, making sure that the left shoulder has not dropped and that both feet and shins are steady as you move deeper into the twist. Stay for 5 breaths. Come out of the twist on an inhale, replace the right hand in Downward-Facing Dog. Repeat, twisting to the other side.

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situations unless you train it to focus, by way of the breath, on the present moment,” says Ross Rayburn, a certified Anusara Yoga teacher based in New York. Rayburn, who teaches yoga workshops for athletes, developed the sport-specific asanas on these pages.

But training your brain is just part of what hitting the mat can do for your game. “The greatest power and efficiency in any sport come when the body has a balance

of strength and flexibility,” Rayburn says. “To reach our potential as athletes, we have to build balanced strength in all of the different muscle groups.”

The repetition of certain key motions—winding up for a softball pitch, landing after a volleyball jump serve, and dribbling the soccer ball—can result in an imbalance of strength in the body, which can lead to aches and pains, less efficiency in your sport, and

even injury. Yoga can help bring your body back into balance by making overused muscles suppler and underused muscles stronger.

For yoga that enhances your favorite summer sport, check out these poses for volleyball, soccer, and softball players. And get ready to see the effects on and off the field. “Yoga helps keep the body strong and the mind centered and in control,” says Parker. “Assets in sports and in life.” ❖

soccer

It only took one Bikram Yoga class for Leslie Osborne, a midfielder for the U.S. Women’s National Soccer Team, to become a convert. “I went once, and that was it,” the 25-year-old from Milwaukee, Wisconsin, says. “Every session, I learned to mentally overcome challenges that I didn’t think I could.” Plus, the noncompetitive nature of the practice was just the break she needed. “I would be exhausted from intense practices. Then I’d go to yoga, and I’d come out rejuvenated,” Osborne says.

No matter at what level you play, soccer demands up to 90 minutes of intense focus. Soccer players sprint, stop short, cut left or right, dribble, and kick hard. As a result, the hamstrings and quadriceps can become tight, which can contribute to back pain and knee strain. The knees, which take the brunt of quick direction changes, are also vulnerable to injury if the muscles and ligaments around them do not support them.

“To protect your knees, it’s essential that all of the ligaments and leg muscles be as strong and supple as possible,” Rayburn says. For soccer players, he recommends postures that strengthen the connective tissue around the knees, shins, and ankles, while cultivating flexibility in the quadriceps and hamstrings.



Utthita Parsvakonasana

(Extended Side Angle Pose)

Side Angle Pose promotes both strength and flexibility in the lower body and strengthens the ankle joints. Stand with your feet wide apart. Turn your right foot and knee out and turn your left foot in about 30 degrees. Cultivate a strong foundation by feeling your weight evenly distributed between the four corners of the feet—the base of the big toe and pinkie toe and the inner and outer heel.

Strongly engage your right leg until you feel your inner thigh muscles (adductors) tone. This will enable you to move your left thigh back and widen it away from the

midline of the pose. From there, bend your right knee 90 degrees.

Place your right forearm on your right thigh, or place your fingertips on the ground outside the right foot. Keeping your left thighbone back, scoop your tailbone toward your pubic bone until you feel your abdominals tone and lift; your left thigh muscles will engage and root the right thighbone. Stretch fully from the pelvis down through the feet. Finally, extend the left arm over the right ear and stretch both arms fully. Hold for 5 breaths and repeat the pose on the other side.



Pigeon Pose, variation

This pose stretches the hips, hip flexors, and quadriceps. Bring the right leg forward into Pigeon Pose, with the right foot under the left hip. Bend the left knee and hold the left foot with the left hand. Place your right hand on your thigh, or place your fingertips on the ground directly in front of you. Press the bottom part of the left thighbone down into the ground. This will engage the muscles and keep the top of the left thighbone back. Just as you did in Extended Side Angle Pose, scoop your tailbone. Keep the pelvis rooting down, stretch the legs, and lengthen the spine upward. Hold for 5 breaths and repeat on the other side.

Supta Padangusthasana

(Reclining Hand-to-Big-Toe Pose), variation

When stretching the hamstrings, the importance of keeping both legs and pelvis engaged is often overlooked. The secret to maintaining alignment in this pose is to focus on the bottom leg when stretching the top; to keep your hips even, focus on pressing the back of the bottom leg toward the ground as you stretch.

Lie on your back. Keeping the left leg flat on the ground (or lengthening toward the ground) with the muscles engaged, extend the right leg up. Interlace your fingers behind your right thigh. Keep the left thighbone rooted and keep the natural arch in your low back as you scoop the tailbone



and extend through the raised leg. Focus on feeling strength and length in both legs. Hold for 5 breaths. As space becomes available, take hold of the big toe and draw the leg in. Release the right leg and repeat on the other side.

volleyball

Volleyball requires quick and balanced reflexes, the ability to jump high and dive low, and strength and flexibility in both the upper and lower body. Your feet—or kneepads, if you're sliding along the floor—take you to the ball, and then your arms pass, set, or spike it. Your core abdominal muscles help make all of these things happen by acting as a link between your arms and your legs. “When your center is strong, the rest of your body

is more coordinated and isn't so prone to injury,” Parker says.

Shoulder strength and flexibility are also crucial for volleyball. Parker notes that the shoulders, which enable you to thrust your arms up quickly for a set or bring them down hard on a spike, are typically tight in most volleyball players. Parker describes the ideal shoulders for playing volleyball as strong but fluid enough to move gracefully and easily.

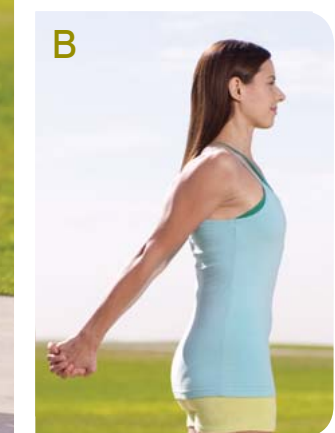
Rayburn focuses on the shoulders and core with three poses for volleyball players. A three-part shoulder stretch opens up the chest and upper back in preparation for strengthening the muscles around the shoulder blades. L-Pose targets the areas around the shoulder blades, and Revolved Abdomen Pose draws on the shoulder opening and strengthening of the two preceding poses and adds an element of core strengthening.

Shoulder Opener Series

These shoulder stretches are the first step to getting the most power and range of motion for serving, setting, and spiking. Repeat this series three times. For the first shoulder opener, stand with your hands interlaced overhead, palms up, and elbows bent. Take a deep breath in, so deep that it feels as though you're overinflating your lungs. As you exhale, keep the head of the arm bones back and push your shoulder blades powerfully onto your upper back, opening the chest. As you continue your exhalation, extend the interlaced hands skyward, holding the shoulder blades strong on the back. Hold for 5 breaths.

From there, interlace your hands behind your back, straighten your arms, and repeat the same actions: Keep the head of the arm bones back and the shoulder blades strong on the back while you take 5 deep breaths.

Next, come to a wall and place your right forearm on it, elbow at shoulder height, fingertips facing the ceiling, and palm open. Using the same three actions—deep breath, head of the arm bones back, and shoulder blades strong on the back—stretch the muscles at the front of the right shoulder and upper chest by slowly turning the torso away from the wall. Hold for 5 breaths and repeat on the other side.





L-Pose at the Wall ●●●

This strengthening pose builds on the work done by the shoulder openers. Place your hands on a table or against a wall at belly height. Then step back and bend at the hips to form a 90-degree angle (or a rotated L). Keep your arms and legs straight and check to see that your feet are pointing forward and your index fingers point straight up. Take a deep breath in, lifting your armpits and upper arm bones. Keeping the arms straight, move the torso closer to the wall, so that the arm bones move back into the shoulder sockets. Press your shoulder blades into your back, and stretch. Hold for at least 1 minute.



Jathara Parivartanasana

(Revolved Abdomen Pose), variation

Lie on your back with your arms out to the sides, elbows bent at a 90-degree angle

and backs of the hands on the ground. Bend the knees right above the hips with your feet lifting off the floor. Take a deep breath, draw the top of the shoulders back (into the ground in this case), and press your shoulder blades strongly against your back. Next, take your knees to the right, bringing them about halfway toward the ground for the duration of 1 complete breath. The farther you move your knees down to the right, the more difficult it will be to keep your left shoulder pressed on the ground, so go only as far as you can while maintaining that alignment. Rotate the knees up to center on an inhalation and over to the other side on the exhalation. Moving with the breath, twist back and forth with the knees, 6 times per side, feeling both the upper body and the abdominals work.

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